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ABSTRACT

Countless American schools are progressing toward effectiveness, ensuring that all students, regardless of family income, sex, or ethnicity, reach basic peformance levels in reading, mathematics, and language arts. Others are moving beyond effectiveness toward excellence and true equity. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) developed a 10-step school-based management approach called Onward to Excellence (OTE) that has contributed to improved student performance in nearly 500 schools. Drawing on educational research into school and teacher effectiveness, instructional leadership, curriculum alignment, program coupling, and educational change, OTE identifies several key concepts critical to successful school improvement within a specific community context. In OTE, the local school effort is led by a team consisting of the principal, key teachers, a central office representative, and a parent or student representative. The OTE process is learned through a 2-year series of training sessions offering implementation opportunities. After a planning team is formed, they study research evidence, profile student performance, set a schoolwide improvement goal, check current instructional practices, plan for implementation, implement the prescription, monitor the program, evaluate progress, and renew efforts. A detailed discussion of OTE's success at improving performance and reducing dropout and discipline referral rates is provided and is supported by charts, graphs and specific examples. Names and addresses of program contacts are also provided. (MLH)

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Success for All Students

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Success for All Students

How *Onward to Excellence* Uses R&D to Improve Schools

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The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) is an independent, nonprofit institution dedicated to improving outcomes for children, youth and adults by providing R & D assistance to schools and communities in providing equitable, high quality educational programs. The school-based management approach described in this booklet is one of many programs, products and processes developed by NWREL to fulfill this mission.

Many resources were utilitzed in the development of *Onward to Excellence*, among them contributions by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement, the Alaska Department of Education, and many other states and districts in the Northwest Region. Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the position of the contributors noted above, and no official endorsement by them should be inferred.

July 1989

1. Effectiveness, Excellence and Equity: Success for All Students

American schools are on the move to improve the way they do business. Pressures on schools are immense, student needs are changing, resources are eroding. Yet countless schools and districts across the nation are making major progress to change and restructure what they do to assure that all students can succeed.

Across the country, schools have major improvement activities under way. Many schools seek **effectiveness**, a situation in which all students reach basic levels of performance in reading, math and language arts, usually measured by standardized tests. In effective schools, no single group of students, whether identified by family income, race, sex or ethnicity, does substantially less well than any other on these minimum levels of the basic skills. Schools that achieve effectiveness have begun the work to guarantee high levels of success for all students.

Some schools are moving beyond effectiveness toward **excellence**, helping students go well beyond the basic levels of performance. In excellent schools, students learn well in many other subjects, master more complex thinking skills, behave well in school and have a good opinion of themselves as learners and of school as a place to learn.

Equity assures the greatest opportunities for all students

Students have the greatest opportunities for success in schools which, while excellent, have created true **equity**. In these schools, student performance is not predictable by a student's background -- there is no group of students that automatically does less well than others. Students from low income homes, students of all races and ethnicities, students of both sexes all succeed at learning much more than the minimum levels of the basic skills.

Applying R & D helps students succeed

Through work with many schools in a variety of contexts, the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL), has developed a school-based management approach that contributes to improved student performance. This approach, called *Onward to Excellence*, features a ten-step process led by a school-based team to change practice in the school.

The process takes a long-term approach to making substantial change in schools, based on how well students are performing. Instead of a project-to-project approach, *Onward to Excellence* becomes a part of the way schools do business, a cyclical process in schools for ongoing improvement.

Nearly 500 schools -- of all sizes and grade levels and in many types of communities -- have learned and used *Onward to Excellence*. In addition, the process has been adapted for use in rural schools and for Chapter I program improvement work. Through applying research and development processes and results, *Onward to Excellence* can help all students succeed.

2. The Research Base: Setting the Stage for Excellence

Educational research over the past two decades has set the stage for creating schools in which all students succeed. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory systematically reviews and synthesizes this research to create an *effective schooling research base*.

The research base identifies schooling practices and characteristics associated with measurable improvements in student achievement and excellence in student behavior. These *effective schooling practices* include elements of schooling associated with a clearly defined curriculum; focused classroom instruction and management; firm, consistent discipline; close monitoring of student performance and strong instructional leadership.

Effective schooling practices to help students succeed

Much of the research base is derived from six areas:

- *School Effects Research:* Studies of higher- and lower-achieving schools to identify schoolwide practices that help students learn.
- *Teacher Effects Research:* Studies of teachers in the classroom to discover effective instructional practices.
- *Research on Instructional Leadership:* Studies focused on what principals do to support teaching and learning.
- *Curriculum Alignment Research:* Studies of effective methods of organizing and managing curriculum.
- *Program Coupling Research:* Examination of the interrelationships among practices used at the district, school building and classroom levels.

- *Research on Educational Change:* Studies to identify conditions and practices that promote significant, durable change in educational programs.

Ongoing research synthesis to support equity

NWREL continues to monitor research results in these areas and is exploring a number of others which directly affect issues of equity -- all students succeeding in all areas without predictability about success level for any single group. Information has been compiled on the importance of culturally appropriate curriculum and teaching thinking skills to all students, for example. Such areas as the importance of language acquisition, the impact of community involvement, and results of desegregation efforts will be carefully reviewed in the future.

Specific schooling practices at the classroom, building and district levels that have been shown to promote student learning are cited in the NWREL publication *Effective Schooling Practices: A Research Synthesis* (1984). Classroom level practices found to contribute to student success, for example, include a group of practices creating high expectations for student learning:

Classroom practices contribute to success

- Teachers set high standards for learning and let students know they are all expected to meet them. Standards are set so they are both challenging and attainable.
- Quality standards for academic work are set and maintained consistently.
- No students are expected to fall below the level of learning needed to be successful at the next level of education.
- Teachers expect all students to do well on tests and earn good grades.

The groups of practices in this synthesis of research support the general statements about effective schools, as follow:

Classroom Level Practices

- Instruction is guided by a preplanned curriculum
- There are high expectations for student learning
- Students are carefully oriented to lessons
- Instruction is clear and focused
- Learning progress is monitored closely
- When students don't understand, they are retaught
- Class time is used for learning
- There are smooth, efficient classroom routines
- Instructional groups formed in the classroom fit instructional needs
- Standards for classroom behavior are explicit
- Personal interactions between teachers and students are positive
- Incentives and rewards for students are used to promote excellence

School Level Practices

Classroom, school and district level practices

- Everyone emphasizes the importance of learning
- Strong leadership guides the instructional program
- The curriculum is based on clear goals and objectives
- Students are grouped to promote effective instruction
- School time is used for learning
- Learning progress is monitored closely
- Discipline is firm and consistent
- There are high expectations for quality instruction
- Incentives and rewards are used to build strong motivation
- Parents are invited to become involved
- Teachers and administrators continually strive to improve instructional effectiveness
- There are pleasant conditions for learning

District Level Practices

- High expectations pervade the organization
- There are policies and procedures that support excellence in student performance
- Student learning is checked regularly
- Improvement efforts are monitored and supported
- Excellence is recognized and rewarded
- Curriculum planning ensures continuity

Key concepts guide school improvement

Drawing on this research base, NWREL identified key concepts that are critical to successful school improvement:

- Successful school improvement is focused on improving student performance, including academic achievement, behavior and attitude.
- Student performance results provide the basis for setting school improvement goals.
- Continuing to improve becomes the way of doing business in schools where students succeed.
- School improvement must be managed.
- The school is the level at which improvements most effectively take place, not the classroom or district.
- School improvements are based on research, a rich resource of examples, advice and direction that supplements craft knowledge.
- In successful school improvements, the school staff, parents and members of the community work together to establish high standards for student performance and to assure that all students successfully meet them.

3. The *Onward to Excellence* School Improvement Process

School improvements should be focused on specific outcomes for students that are defined by the local school and community. The community culture -- the combined interests, expectations and backgrounds of all community members -- directly influences the school and has impact on how school improvements are designed and managed. Successful school improvements are guided by local leadership decisions about how best to support and enhance ongoing efforts and address locally identified needs.

Onward to Excellence (OTE) is a school-based management process for improving student performance designed to help schools apply the effective schooling research in local settings to help all students succeed. *Onward to Excellence* can be a tool for long-term, ongoing change for school improvement.

School-based management process to improve student performance

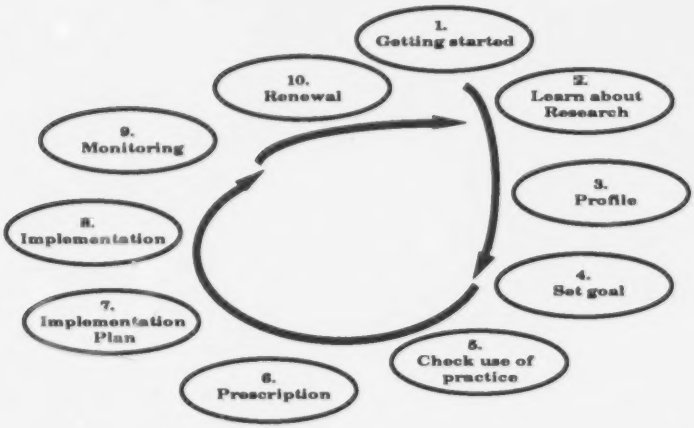
In OTE, the local school effort is led by a leadership team, consisting of the principal, key teachers, a central office representative and, as appropriate, a parent or student representative. The leadership team learns the OTE process through a two-year series of seven training sessions, gradually implementing the steps as they learn the process.

The team leads the school through the ten-step OTE process to collect student performance data, use the data with the full staff to set a schoolwide improvement goal, plan a prescription for improvement, prepare for and implement the prescription, monitor implementation and evaluate progress toward the improvement goal. Teams work closely with staff members and can involve parents and community members at many points in the OTE process.

Once the school completes the full process the first time, schools again collect student data, use new data to renew work on the current goal or to target a new goal, and follow the process to plan, implement and monitor improvements.

The OTE cycle becomes a school-based method for managing improvements based on regular collection and analysis of data on student performance. In addition, the OTE process provides new structures for teachers, administrators, parents and the community to learn and work collegially together for the benefit of all students.

Onward to Excellence
School Improvement Process



Step 1: Getting Started.

The leadership team is formed

Research shows that involving the school principal, other school staff members, and district office personnel jointly in a school improvement effort increases success. In OTE, a leadership team from each local school manages the planning and implementation of improvements in the school.

In this step, the principal informs all staff that an improvement effort is taking place, introduces them to the concept of research-based improvement and describes the ten-step improvement process. The principal also points out to staff that there are opportunities for staff involvement in

planning and implementation of improvements at specific steps in the process and initiates a process for selecting a leadership team. Team members are selected to assure a broad representation of the entire school community, and the principal may include a parent or other member of the community as a full member of the leadership team.

Step 2: Learn About Research.

Leadership team and staff study research findings

The effective schooling research base identifies schooling practices and characteristics associated with measurable improvements in student performance. These *effective schooling practices* focus on elements of schooling associated with curriculum, classroom instruction and management, discipline, monitoring of student performance, and instructional leadership.

The leadership team studies this research base to gain indepth knowledge of effective schooling practices. They then introduce the entire staff to the research and findings. More study can follow, as desired.

Step 3: Profile Student Performance.

Team and staff collect data on student academic achievement, behavior and attitude

To make changes for improvement, it is necessary to know what is actually taking place in the school. Current levels of student performance must be identified before any planning for focused improvement takes place.

The leadership team, with involvement of staff, collects data about teaching and learning in their school, including student performance, characteristics and practices likely to affect student performance, contextual factors and resources. A survey of community perceptions about how well students are learning may also be conducted. These data are summarized into a single report called the school "profile."

The profile provides a broad picture of the performance of all groups of students across many or all curriculum areas. Data

are included that describe student academic achievement, behavior and attitude. For each group of data, a one-page description is prepared to include a display of the data (chart, graph) and brief narrative descriptions highlighting key findings. It is important that profile data be readily understood by all staff. Narrative statements describe but do not evaluate data.

Step 4: Set a Schoolwide Goal for Improvement.

Staff set schoolwide goal

Managed change is most effective when focused on priority goals. When schoolwide efforts for improvement are tied to clear goals, a commonality of purpose gives strength to improvement work.

At this step in the process, the leadership team directly involves the entire school staff and selected community members in the identification of a schoolwide goal to improve student performance. Goal setting is based on data compiled in the profile.

Step 5: Check Current Instructional Practices.

Team checks practices

An analysis of current instructional practice is necessary to determine where practices can be changed to meet the improvement goal. The leadership team collects information about practices on a schoolwide basis. They also collect data from all staff through surveys and sometimes through classroom observations. Students may be surveyed for their perceptions of effective schooling practice in the school. Surveys of parents and other community members may be used to gather additional input. The team then summarizes the information and presents findings to the full staff. The staff reviews the data about instructional practice to identify schoolwide strengths and weaknesses.

Step 6: Develop a Research-Based Prescription for Improvement.

Team and staff decide how to change practice

Once the goal or goals are established and current levels of practice identified, the next step is to select ways to change practice to meet the improvement goal. The leadership team involves the staff in reviewing effective schooling research results related to the improvement goal. They select instructional methods and techniques which research shows can contribute to the improvement of student performance in the goal area. The team may also meet with the parent organization or other groups to discuss community involvement. This list of practices becomes the draft of the schoolwide improvement *prescription*.

Step 7: Plan for Implementation.

Plans for making the change happen

The leadership team, with involvement of the staff, creates a plan for putting selected effective schooling practices into operation in the school. Responsibilities are assigned, materials are developed, necessary resources are identified and timelines are established for implementation of research-based practices related to the goal area. A heavy emphasis is placed on designing a high quality staff development program to build skills related to practice in the goal area.

Step 8: Implement the Prescription.

Begin to change practice and improve

According to the plan, the new practices are implemented in the school. The leadership team manages the implementation, working with staff members as required by the plan. The team may also enlist the aid of parents and community members, and may work directly with parents who are helping their children to succeed.

Step 9: Monitor Implementation.

The team tracks progress

To assure progress toward planned improvements, the leadership team and the staff monitor completion of activities

specified by the plan and changes in classroom and schoolwide practice. In addition, as the school progresses toward full implementation, the leadership team monitors student performance to identify the impact of the improvements.

The leadership team records all monitoring results, analyzes school progress and keeps the staff informed. Based on monitoring, adjustments are made to the prescription and the implementation plan as needed to improve effectiveness.

Step 10: Evaluate Progress and Renew Efforts.

Evaluate, celebrate and begin anew

At the end of the first cycle of improvement (usually two years), the entire staff reviews improvement results under the direction of the leadership team. They identify strengths and weaknesses of the plan and its implementation, and they recommend ways to improve the schoolwide approach. The team may return to parents and the community to see if they perceive changes in the school or have suggestions for new improvement work.

The staff and leadership team discuss the improvement effort and decide whether the school should continue to work in the original goal area or move on to a new goal. In either case, plans are made for entering a new improvement cycle using the process of data collection, profile preparation, goal setting, prescription development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

The *Onward to Excellence* process focuses on assuring that all students succeed. With a team of leaders managing improvements, full staff involvement, and ongoing contact with parents and the community, OTE creates a long-term, systematic approach for local school improvement to meet locally identified student needs.

4. Impact of *Onward to Excellence*

Onward to Excellence was piloted in fifteen schools in three states between 1981 and 1984. Since the pilot of the process, nearly 500 schools have completed or are involved in training to learn and use OTE. Many districts have chosen to adopt OTE in all their schools.

OTE has been used in many settings

The process has been successfully used in elementary schools, middle/junior high schools and high schools; and OTE has been applied in rural, suburban and urban schools. Schools have set goals and changed practice, and many are now reporting significant changes in how well students succeed.

The chart below shows the geographic distribution of these schools:

Location and Levels of OTE Schools

Location	Elementary Schools	Middle Level Schools	High Schools	Multi-level Schools (K-8, 7-12, K-12)	Totals
Colorado	36	6	6	1	49
Hawaii	16	10	5	15	46
Idaho	15	5	4	4	28
Mississippi	8	4	2	-	14
Montana	19	6	2	4	31
Oregon	131	55	52	4	242
Panama (DoDDS)	9	1	2	1	13
Washington	27	12	11	1	51
Wyoming	5	-	-	-	5
TOTALS	266	99	84	30	479 Schools

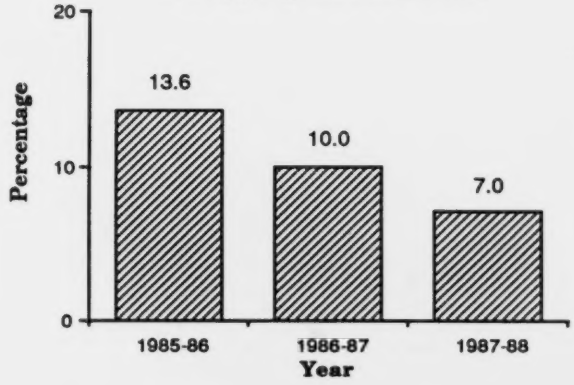
The growing numbers of schools choosing to use OTE is one indication of the impact of the process. As more and more schools use OTE and collect information on changes in student performance, evidence also grows of the impact of *Onward to Excellence* on helping students to succeed.

Success at the high school level

One high school adopted *Onward to Excellence* on the eve of a teachers' strike in 1983. After several cycles of the OTE process, the school has experienced major changes in student performance. The school reports improvements in attendance, reductions in referrals for disciplinary actions, improvements in standardized test scores and a decrease in dropout rates (Figure 1). In 1989, the school received national recognition as an unusually successful school.

Figure 1.

Percentage of Student Body Dropping Out of School



In another high school, work has focused for the past three years on improving student thinking and problem solving skills. The staff has agreed on skills definitions and standards, established teaching strategies, developed procedures for observing teachers using the strategies, established a peer coaching process and developed a survey of student thinking skills. While data on student performance are still being

collected, the staff at the school has learned to work together to focus on improving student performance.

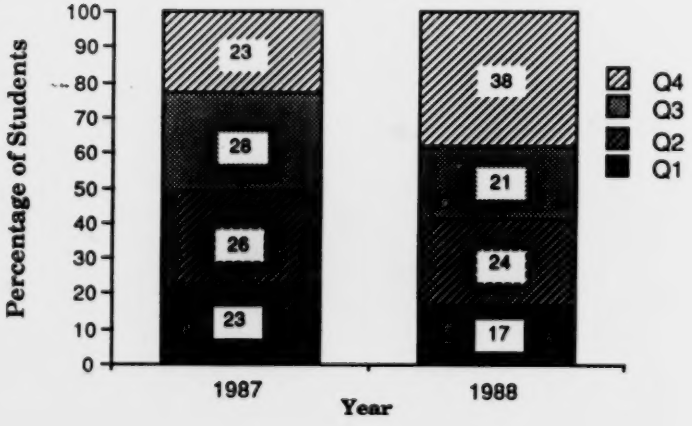
Improvements in elementary student reading and language arts

Elementary schools also have success with *Onward to Excellence*. In one school, staff members worked together to restructure the way time and staff were allocated in the school reading program: the percentage of students reading below grade level has decreased from 40 percent to 9 percent in five years. In addition, there has been a dramatic reduction in the number of students referred for special education services due to the new ways that the staff is working together and the intensive remedial instruction in regular classrooms instituted through OTE.

At another elementary school, the staff set a goal to improve performance in language arts. Over the past two years, the percentage of students in the top quartile of the school's standardized test has increased from 23 to 38 percent; and the percentage in the lowest quartile has decreased from 23 to 17 percent (Figure 2). More students are succeeding at higher levels in this school.

Figure 2.

Percentage of Students by Quartile
CAT - Language

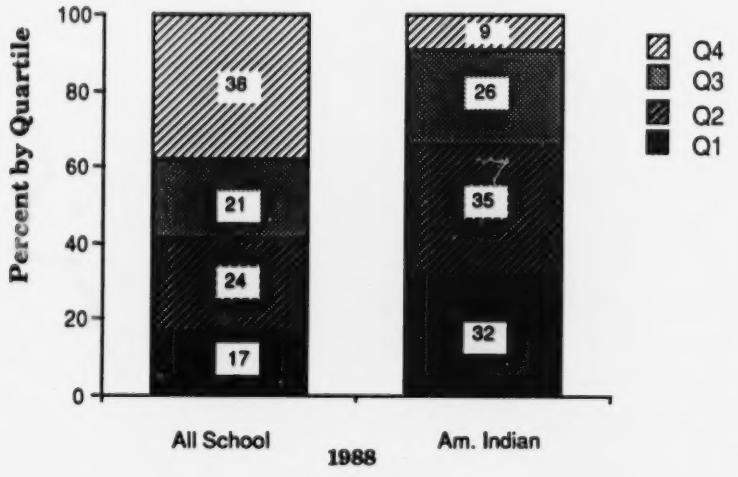


The success in improving language arts scores led to more indepth examination of data and a new understanding of inequities in performance among groups of students. They first identified percentages of students schoolwide, then broke down scores for the school's large group of American Indian students (Figure 3). While 38 percent of the students schoolwide were in the top quartile, only 9 percent of the American Indian students were performing at this level. In addition, only 17 percent of the students schoolwide were in the lowest quartile, but 32 percent of the American Indian students were in this quartile.

Experience with the *Onward to Excellence* process prepared this staff to disaggregate student performance data, which resulted in increased knowledge about inequities. These data have set the stage for further work in the school to change this situation.

Figure 3.

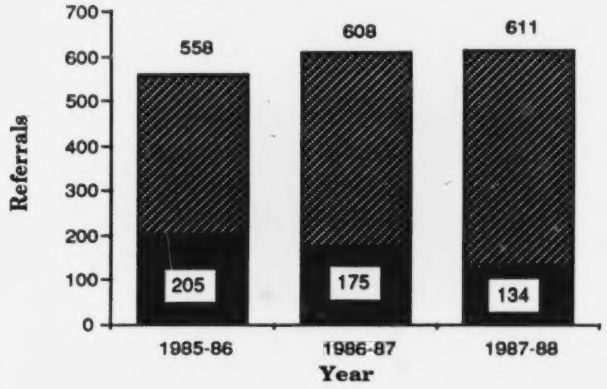
Percentage by Quartiles
All School American Indian - Language



Staff at another elementary school focused on changing the pattern of student social behavior at their school. Over a three-year period, the number of discipline referrals per year decreased from 205 to 134, while the number of students attending the school increased from 558 to 611 (Figure 4).

Figure 4.

Number of Referrals in Relationship To Number of Students in School



Overall, schools continue to report results that support the effectiveness of the OTE process. More and more, schools are choosing to use *Onward to Excellence* to focus their improvement work on helping all students succeed.

5. Information About *Onward to Excellence*

School improvement will remain a high priority for Americans moving into the 21st century. More and more schools will reach a level of effectiveness, more and more will move on to excellence, establishing schools with a focus on equity. And these schools will continue to need tools, resources and information to help them as they change. *Onward to Excellence* can help schools focus on student performance, set schoolwide improvement goals and move ahead so that all students can succeed.

For further information about *Onward to Excellence*, contact:

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